

## Quinque 7: To Bardo and Back

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## Quinque 7: To Bardo and Back

Untitled Disclaimer: Everyone who has been on the show The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest belongs to HB and everyone you don't recognize belongs to me.

### **\*\*Prologue\*\***

The year is 2015. The world as we know it no longer exists.

In 2003, Ezekial Rage launched nuclear bombs from China at Cairo, London, Moscow, and Tokyo. The targeted cities retaliated before asking questions. By 2005, the world economy had collapsed, and the United States government fell apart. The former superpower has split into two warring halves, Dulab and Zinja.

The new America is one of hardships and struggles. Warfare has decimated most of the population between the ages of 35 and 65 and has drained the continent of its natural resources. The young and hardy have quickly risen through the ranks to become the new leaders. They are strong, smart, and willing to do anything they have to if it means the end of the war.

Dulab, consisting of the former states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, South Dakota, and Montana, is dedicated to upholding life as they knew it before the war. They are led by Commander Bennett and Roger "Race" Bannon, men well acquainted with military expeditions. Zinja, made of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and Kansas, has fallen under the rule of a madman named Dr. Zin. Zin's ultimate goal is global domination, starting with the fall of Dulab.

The Dulabian's fight back courageously. They have organized Task Forces composed of their best young freedom fighters. As Quinque, the most elite Task Force, Jonathan Quest, Jessica Bannon, Alexander Anderson, Ashley Ray, and Dion Jennings fight to defend and expand the Dulab territory against Zin. Quinque is passionately determined to resurrect the world they once knew.

**\*\*Quinque #7: To Bardo and Back\*\***

Jessie Bannon stared with wide eyes at the flat line monitoring her father's heart. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly as her mind tried to deny what she was seeing. A high pitched wail from the alarm echoed throughout the small room. Just as Hadji's hand descended on her shoulder, a slow, weak beep filled the room. She looked at the monitor to find the green line methodically moving up and down.

Dr. Hernandez gently pushed her away from the side of Race's bed so that he could check her father. Nurses gathered around the bed, each trying to figure out what had happened to Race. A quiet ringing noise came from Jessie's pants pocket. It took her a long moment to realize it was her cell phone.

"This had better be good," she growled at the person on the other end.

"Caroline? It's Stick. Where are you? What's going on?"

When Jessie had first found out Race was in the hospital, she had called Hadji and Jonny, but she had not yet had time to tell the rest of Quinque about what had happened.

"Stick, I'm glad to hear from you." And once she had said the words, she was surprised to find they were true. "Bannon's in the hospital."

"What? Why? What happened?" Xander's voice rose in anxiety. "Oh, never mind. Pudge and I will pick up Sandman, and then we'll be on our way over. We'll see you in a few, Caroline."

Hadji glanced at her as she hung up the phone.

"The rest of Quinque is on their way," she stated.

Hadji solemnly nodded. "That will be good. I wish I knew where Jonny was."

"Me, too."

\* \* \*

Jonny groaned, somehow ignoring the pain in his head that pulsed to the beating of his heart. He cast his thoughts out, trying to remember what had happened. Jessie had called, he had gone to Laurie's, and then darkness. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked around. The first thing that came to his mind was a medieval torture chamber. With a small grimace, he tried to sit up, only to discover that he could barely move. It was only then that he realized he was shackled spread-eagle to a marble sacrificial altar.

\_All right,\_ he thought grimly. \_So a medieval torture chamber might

not be too far from the truth.\_

A sound from another end of the room made him turn his head and he watched as Laurie walked toward him. She was still wearing her coat and gloves, although for some reason, she held her right hand curled into a tight fist.

"Good to see you're finally awake, Apollo." She sat down on the altar beside him.

"Where are we?" Jonny wondered.

Laurie blinked. "I was expecting something more cliché like, 'You'll never get away with this.'" She paused, glancing around. "After we moved to Columbus, Ash and I spent hours searching through the city. This is the old Science and Arts building downtown. Apparently they were having some sort of medieval tour right before the fall. And like so many things, after the fall, no one came to claim all this old stuff."

Jonny sadly looked up at her. "Why are you doing this?"

Laurie laughed. "There are many reasons, Jonny." Pausing, she studied him. "I envied you, you know. Before Quinque was even first formed. I wanted to be exactly like you. That was the reason why I accepted the Omega job when Bannon offered it to me. You were my inspiration -- the mysterious and always successful Apollo. Personally, I hated working on Omega. There was too much risk involved, but I thought it was the only way I could work myself into another Task Force. I had actually planned on talking with Bannon after getting back from California about joining Quinque. But I got caught instead. Billy and Joey were killed during that mission."

She laughed again. "Do you know how ironic I found it when I learned my sister was on Quinque? She had the position I had always wanted. It was Ashley, not me, who finally got to stand beside Apollo."

"What do you have against Bannon?"

Without bothering to answer his question, she laid her left hand on his right cheek, tenderly tracing the scar Dr. Zin had given him ten years ago. "For years I have admired you from afar." Leaning down, she kissed him. "And now you are mine." She reached out with her right hand and traced his lips with a finger.

"This isn't going to exactly endear me to you," Jonny said, pulling his head away from her touch. "You do know that, don't you?"

She smiled. "It hardly matters anymore, Apollo." Standing, she took off her gloves and pushed them into her coat pocket.

Jonny narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're dying. I just poisoned you."

\* \* \*

Xander and Dion sat in chairs across from Race's bed while Ashley had an arm around Jessie's shoulders. Since the last heart attack, or so

Dr. Hernandez had called it, Race's condition had not changed. The doctors still had no idea what was affecting him or how to reverse the sudden illness. Feeling restless, Xander stood up, stretched, and walked to the end of the bed, glancing idly at Race's chart. For a moment he read Race's symptoms, turned away, and then abruptly turned back. Convulsions, extreme body temperatures, high fever . . . they all sounded like symptoms that could be from poisoning. Immediately, Xander pulled out his cell phone and dialed Aaron's number.

"Big Mac," his friend greeted.

"It's Stick. Has Dr. Kensington had a chance to get a closer look at that stuff we brought in?"

"A little," Aaron replied. "Why?"

"Ask him if he thinks it could cause these symptoms." Xander rattled off the words from Race's chart.

"All right, hold on."

There was a long pause as Aaron conversed with Dr. Kensington. Quinque was watching him with curiosity in their eyes, obviously wondering exactly what he was up to.

"He says yes, it could. Stick, what's going on?"

Xander cursed under his breath. "Tell him to start working on an antidote. Whoever made that stuff up has already given it to Bannon."

"What?" Aaron's voice rose with the word. "I'll have him get on it right away. I'll call you in an hour with an update."

"All right. And thanks, Big Mac."

"Any time, Stick."

Quinque was still looking at him when he hung up the phone.

"Let me guess," Dion started. "That powder we found is the poison that did this to Bannon."

Xander nodded. "Looks that way. Dr. Kensington is going to try and whip up something that can counter it."

"What are you two talking about?" Ashley interrupted. "What powder did you find?"

Quickly Xander and Dion told the other three people about the attack on Ferris Haldewheel and the resulting discoveries. When they were finished, Jessie shook her head.

"You sure have been busy," she commented. "But good work none the less."

Hadji sighed and crossed his arms. "I like this less and less, my friends. Jonny still hasn't shown up. And now Race has been poisoned. Something is definitely wrong."

"You don't know that something's wrong with Jonny," Jessie argued. "He said he had something to take care of and then he'd be on his way over. Whatever he's doing just might have taken longer than he expected. At this moment in time, there's nothing to suggest he's met with foul play of any sort."

But all of them in the room knew that even Jessie really didn't believe those words.

\* \* \*

"You envy me so you're going to kill me?" Jonny questioned.

"It's not as strong as the stuff I used on Bannon," Laurie said. "You probably won't even start feeling it run through your body until a week has passed. And it might take up to three weeks for you to actually die."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because," Laurie answered.

"Because?" Jonny angrily repeated. "That's all you're going to say? Because. Laurie, what happened to you in that prison? You still haven't given me one good reason as to why you want to kill Bannon and me."

"My reasons aren't important to you. All that should matter to you right now is the fact that you are dying."

"So what? Do you have any idea of how often I have looked into the face of death before and after the fall? Why should I care now when I have never cared in the past?"

Laurie turned, meeting his eyes. "You're scared."

Jonny's face grew hard. "I'm only human." He paused to draw a wavering breath. "That reminds me of something Race once told me."

She raised an eyebrow. "And what was that?"

"That real courage is about fighting back, especially when you're scared. Yes, I've been scared plenty of times in my life. But the single, most important thing is that no matter what, I continued on. I did my job and I got done what needed to be done. Because there is one thought that scares me more than death."

"And what is that?"

"The idea that Zin may one day rule the world. Even if I do die, I will know that I did everything I could to stop him."

"No." Laurie held up a hand to her head, as if it suddenly hurt her. "Shut up, Quest. You don't know what you're talking about."

"What did they do to you, Laurie?" he asked. "What lies did they feed to you?"

"Just shut up." She pulled a cell phone out of the opposite pocket

she had put her gloves in. "Now you're going to call Quinque and tell them that you're okay."

"No."

Laurie raised an eyebrow. "No? You hardly have a choice in the matter."

"I won't do it."

Laurie stiffened. She walked over to another altar, lifting the cloth that covered whatever lay underneath. With a grim smile, she pulled out long, rusty dagger. Jonny's eyes widened as she made her way back to him.

She could feel his heart start to beat faster as she lifted his shirt and put the dagger against his bare abdomen. Feeling a deep rush of power, she noted how quickly his chest rose and fell with fast breaths.

"You don't want to do this," he implored. "It won't do you any good."

"But it might make me feel a whole lot better," she stated. "And I will do it, make no mistake, unless you call Quinque."

Jonny drew a deep breath. "No. Why should I? As you went to great pains earlier to remind me, I'm already dying. Why does it matter if I die today or in three weeks?"

With a sigh, Laurie brought the dagger down to her side. "You are so frustrating."

He could not help the lopsided grin that suddenly eclipsed his face. "I've heard that one before."

Laurie tilted her head. "What do you want out of life, Quest?"

Jonny blinked. "What?"

"Why do you keep going? After all the years and all the fights, Zin still rules Zinja. You've been unable to beat him. So why do you keep opposing him?"

"But I have beaten him," Jonny disagreed. "Both before and after the fall. I've stopped his crazy plans of world domination too many times to count. True, he still has part of the former United States. But also true, he doesn't have all of the former United States. And I know that I helped make part of the latter a reality. I might not be able to completely destroy his reign, but I can help keep him isolated."

"You are a wonder." Laurie shook her head. "You still have so much optimism within you. Do you always look for the good in people?"

"I try."

She leaned in close, her mouth close to his ear. "Then know that you won't find any in me." Before he even knew what was happening, she

passionately kissed him on the lips.

"What . . .?" Jonny breathlessly asked after she had drawn away.

"I'm not afraid of dying."

His mind was racing, trying to figure out what she was thinking.

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of dying alone. For so many years I have been by myself. I had no friends and there was a huge gap between my family and me because of Omega. And then in the prison." She took a shuddering breath. "That was the worst. You had no one to depend on but yourself. You stuffed your emotions, your feelings, everything, into a tiny, locked chest in a corner of your soul. It's what you had to do to stay alive. If you felt something, you would die. You built up walls and hoped that nothing would come along that could tear them down."

"Laurie, you're free. Zin no longer has any hold on you. You can do whatever you want, see whoever you want, feel whatever you want. You don't have to be scared, or alone, anymore."

Laurie shook her head. "Whatever you're trying, it won't work, Quest. Now, are you going to call Quinque or not?"

"Not."

"You might be willing to die, but would you be willing to kill your precious Jessie?" She met his eyes. "Because if you don't call them, I will go out right now, find her, and kill her. And I won't give her the poison I've given you. No, she'll be dead within an hour. So, what do you say? Will you give them a call?"

Reluctantly, Jonny nodded and Laurie pulled out her cell phone.

"I'm glad to hear that. Oh, and don't try any of the Task Force trick phrases like 'the macaroni is hot' for 'I'm in trouble.' Because I was in Omega, I know them all. Do you follow, Quest?"

Jonny nodded again.

"Good. What's Jessie's cell phone number?"

Jonny rattled off the number and Laurie punched the keys. She put the phone up to his ear when it started ringing.

"Caroline." Jessie picked up after the sixth ring.

"It's Apollo."

"Apollo? Where are you? You said you were going to come over to the hospital after you did something. It's been over an hour!"

Jonny grimaced. "Caroline, I'm sorry. I got a little busy."

"Busy? Dad's probably dying and you're not here because you're busy?"

"Caroline, no, Race is going to be just fine. Remember what happened in Houston? Race has been to Bardo and back. He'll be fine."

"I hope so, Apollo. So you'll come by as soon as you can?"

"Of course. I'll talk to you later."

\* \* \*

Everyone in the room turned as Jessie stiffened and hung up the phone. She dropped her head into her hands and drew a shuddering breath.

"What did he say, Jess?" Ashley wondered.

Slowly, Jessie looked across the room at Hadji. "He said it."

Hadji's face went pale. "No," he whispered.

"What? He said what?" Xander asked, trading glances between Jessie and Hadji. "What's going on here? What did he say?"

"Bardo and back," Hadji murmured as Jessie nodded. "It's a phrase that we made up before the fall. If one of us said it, the others would know we were in trouble."

"So, it's a code phrase," Dion said. "But there's something more, isn't there? You wouldn't be so upset just because Apollo's in trouble."

"You're right, of course." Hadji rubbed a hand across his forehead. "It means that not only is he in trouble, but . . ."

"But . . .?" Ashley prompted.

"But also that he's dying," Jessie finished.

"What?" Dion yelled.

Ashley turned on her watch, tracking Jonny. She shook her head and glanced at her teammates, worried. "I'm not picking up his signal."

"Did you bring your laptop?" Xander wondered.

Nodding, Ashley was already reaching into the bag at her side. "Of course." She turned it on and waited for it to boot up. After a few minutes, she was typing wildly at the keyboard. "You're not going to like this, guys."

"What?" Jessie's eyes grew wide. "Where is he?"

"Nowhere," Ashley replied grimly. "His watch has been destroyed. But its last known location was at Laurie's apartment."

Xander's head snapped up and he stared at Ashley. "Laurie's?"



Ashley turned pale. "Oh no. Do you know what this means? Someone's got Laurie and Jonny. And if Jonny believes he's dying, what could they have done to my sister?"\_ \_

\_Sure\_, Xander thought as he turned away so that the group could not see the terror that suddenly showed on his face. \_She could be right\_. But something deep within him told him she wasn't. Slowly he turned back toward Quinque.

Dion caught sight of the look on Xander's face. "Xand, what is it?"

"Jess, what exactly did Jonny say?" Xander questioned.

Jessie glanced at him, shrugged, and then repeated the short conversation she had held with their leader.

Xander cursed quietly.

"Does this have something to do with that 'backdoor' you were telling me about earlier?" Dion asked.

"I think it does. No, let me rephrase that. I know it does."

"What backdoor?" Jessie looked from Xander to Dion and back to Xander. "What's going on here?"

Xander took a deep breath, trying to decide where to start. "You know how secretive Jonny has been recently." Quinque nodded. "He's been watching someone that he thought might be a Zinja spy. We didn't want to pull the whole group into it, which is why neither of us has said anything. But in that conversation he had with Jess, he used the code phrase we worked out. As a just in case sort of emergency type thing."

"And what was your code phrase?" Hadji asked.

Xander grimaced. "Remember Houston."

"Why?" Jessie narrowed her eyes.

"Houston?" Ashley questioned. "You don't think Laurie knows the spy, do you?"

"No." Xander shook his head and Ashley's face relaxed in relief. "We think she is the spy."

"What?" Ashley asked, angrily. "You're both crazy! Just because she was captured doesn't automatically make her a Zinja spy."

"That's not what it's about," Xander retaliated. "We both felt that she was allowed to escape from prison. You remember how none of the guards really challenged us. For a prison that was supposed to be impossible to escape from, we got away with a minimal amount of trouble."

"That proves nothing," Ashley countered.

"Had Jonny found anything to link Laurie to Zinja?" Hadji entered into the conversation.

"No, not yet. In fact, he was frustrated because he couldn't find any evidence."

"Then why do you still think Laurie is a spy?" Ashley's voice was full of passion.

"You heard what Jessie said. He gave the code phrase. Remember Houston. That means Laurie is a spy for Zinja."

"Xander, Ashley." Dion stepped between them. "This fighting is getting us nowhere. I think the important thing to keep in mind is that we don't know where Jonny is and that he believes himself to be dying. We can worry about who the spy is after we have found Jonny."

Suddenly Xander's cell phone started ringing, making everyone in the room jump.

"This is Stick."

"It's Big Mac. Dr. Kensington is working on an antidote. He thinks it will take him about an hour to mix it and make sure it works. We'll come over to the hospital when it's ready."

"Thanks." Even the good news Aaron had just given him couldn't alleviate his worries. "Someone will be here, waiting for you."

"Is something else happening, Stick? Is Bannon . . .?"

"No, Bannon's fine. I didn't mean to worry you, Mac. We're just having a minor crisis here. Don't worry, it's a Quinque thing."

Aaron paused. "All right. Listen, Stick, I'm your friend . . . "

"I know, Mac, I know. I'll fill you in later, I promise. There's something going down, yes, but we also need Bannon back in the world of the living."

"We'll be there as soon as we can. Hang in there, Stick."

"I will, Mac. Hopefully we'll see you soon."

"Please tell me that was good news," Dion said the moment Xander hung up the phone.

"It was good news. Dr. Kensington should be over here in an hour with an antidote. Bannon should be just fine." He drew a deep breath and rubbed his left temple. "Dion's right." Looking up, he caught Ashley's eye. "Truce until we can figure out what's going on?" He held out his hand.

Ashley paused and then grabbed his hand. "Yeah, truce."

"Good," Jessie said from beside her father's bed. "Now that we're acting as a team again we need to figure out exactly what's going on."

"What should we do?" Dion asked, turning toward her.

"Ash, I want you to go to Laurie's apartment. I don't know if there will be any clues there or not, but take a look. That was the last place we know for certain Jonny was." Ashley nodded. "Dion, Xander, I want you to see if this Haldewheel fellow you mentioned earlier is awake or not. If he is, I want some description on who attacked him. Right now he's our only witness to this whole fiasco. And after that, I want you to look through the city as much as you can. I know there's no way you'll be able to explore every nook and cranny, but do the best you can. Meanwhile, Hadj and I will stay here and wait for Dr. Kensington to show up. I'll give you all a call once he's here and let you know how Bannon's doing. Does that sound good to everyone?"

Quinque nodded.

"If you find anything, and I mean anything, call me. I'll be your point man. And unless things change when I call you later, we'll meet back here at ten o'clock to debrief. I know it's been a long night and that it's only going to be longer, but we can't rest until we've got this solved." Jessie looked at each of her teammates. "Good luck."

\* \* \*

Ferris Haldewheel's room was three floors down from Race's. Ferris' wife, Susannah, still sat by his bedside. She stood and wiped away tears as the two men walked into the room.

"Have you found anything?" she wondered, knowing they were looking into the attack.

"Not really," Dion admitted. "We know why he was beaten, but we don't know who did it. Not yet, at least."

Susannah ducked her head and grabbed onto her husband's hand. "Oh."

"Look, Suze, we'll get to the bottom of this. Trust me when I say we're going to nail the creep who did this." All of the tension in Dion's body seemed to bubble up as he talked to Susannah. "Quinque will not rest until this mystery is solved, you have my word. Peacekeeper isn't the only Task Force who can work on domestic problems. Besides, this whole thing has gotten a lot more personal for Quinque." He laid a hand on Susannah's shoulder. "We'll figure it out, Suze."

Susannah smiled at the two. "Thank you, Dion, Xander. Ferris is lucky to have friends like you."

Xander looked down at the prone man. "Is he doing any better?"

She shrugged and sighed. "He still hasn't woken up at all. And I haven't heard him say anything; else you know I would have called. A doctor came in a little while ago and said he was resting easier now. Not that I can tell much of a difference."

"He'll be just fine," Dion comforted. "Thank you so much for your help, Suze." He gave her a tight hug. "We'll talk to you later."

Once they were outside the room, Xander sighed and ran a hand through his brown hair. "So the only thing we still have to go on is that whoever we're looking for wears Nike shoes."

"Looks that way," Dion agreed.

"Well, that only narrows the number of suspects down to half the population of Columbus." Xander threw his arms up into the air. "This is going to get us nowhere. There's got to be some piece of this puzzle we're missing."

Dion shook his head. "We have holes, but no missing pieces. I mean, I can clearly see exactly what has happened. We just don't know who is behind all this."

Xander stopped, crossing his arms. "Yes, we do."

"Laurie? Do you really think Ashley's sister could beat up Ferris and kill Jonny?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Jonny told Jessie that Laurie is the one who captured him. There was absolutely no reason for him to use that phrase otherwise."

"All right, let's just say, for the sake of argument, that Laurie did kidnap Jonny. Why would she have done something like that?"

Xander paused. "Maybe because he went to confront her about his suspicions?"

"Why would he have done that? Why wouldn't he have just told Quinque?"

"Because he still didn't have any hard evidence against her and went to her apartment to look for something incriminating. I know that neither of us wanted to tell Quinque about it. We were afraid that Ashley would react exactly how she reacted."

"Why couldn't you have told me at least?"

"We wanted to be absolutely sure."

"Are you now?"

"Am I now what?"

"Absolutely sure that Laurie is a Zinja spy?"

Xander blinked and thought for a long moment. "Yes."

Dion nodded. "I believe you. Something must have happened to her in that prison, but what exactly . . ." He shrugged. "I have no idea. For all we know, Zin has figured out how to brainwash people. But right now, that's the least of our worries." Glancing out a nearby window, he took in the Columbus skyline. "Somewhere out there she has our leader, who is dying. There must be somewhere, besides her apartment, that she knows well enough to have taken him. All we have to do is figure out where that place is."

"Oh, piece of cake," Xander grinned.

"Nah, I prefer pie." Dion returned the grin.

"So where do you want to start?"

"Well, what's one of the first things you did when you got to Columbus?"

"Poked around in some of the abandoned buildings," Xander admitted.

"Yeah, me, too. I think we might want to do that again."

Xander nodded. "Then what are we waiting for?"

\* \* \*

"What happened to your mother?" Laurie wondered.

"Why do you want to know?" Jonny asked, cautiously eyeing his captor.

Laurie shrugged. "Just trying to start some kind of conversation. I was just thinking and realized that I didn't know that much about you."

"Laurie," Jonny started slowly. "I've just got to know something. You administer the poison through skin, right?"

Laurie nodded.

"Does it immediately soak into the bloodstream?"

"No, not all of it. Some of it stays on a person's flesh until washed off."

Jonny paled. "So that kiss . . .?"

"I told you I was afraid of dying alone."

"Why do you want to die?" Jonny whispered.

"By the time I die, I will have done everything I was sent here to do. Bannon will be dead before the sunrise, Bennett is next, and when security has died down some, I will free Anaya. After that I have nothing to live for."

"What about Ashley? She was devastated when you disappeared. What do you think your death would do to her?"

"It doesn't matter. None of it matters any more." She stood, stretching. "Well, I'm going out for a while." Pulling a scarf out of her pocket, she neared Jonny. Jonny could not stop her as she tied the scarf over his mouth. "I doubt anyone would be able to hear you if you started yelling, but I can't afford to take any chances." Leaning over, she gave him a light kiss on the forehead. "I'll be back later."

Jonny watched her leave. Once he was alone, he tugged on the chains

that held him down, but found his movement was limited. Regardless of how old the altar might have been, it had been well made and stood the test of time. His thoughts turned toward his smashed watch. He wondered if Quinque had figured out all of his phrases. Not that he knew how they would find him.\_ \_

\_Sometimes I think I should just have a tracker embedded into my arm or something.\_

\* \* \*

Ashley kneeled down on Laurie's kitchen floor, picking up a spring. She held it up and studied it with a learned eye. Yep, she was fairly sure the spring had come from Jonny's watch. She had spent enough time working on them to know the insides of the watches well. Pausing, she put her head on a hand. He had been here -- well, they had known that much already. But what had he been doing here? What had happened? Her eyes glanced around the kitchen, taking in everything on the counters. Flour, sugar, yeast -- typical cooking ingredients. She stopped. Sugar? How did her sister find sugar? Not even her parents had that much sugar in their kitchen. And Laurie had only been back in Columbus for a few days. Grabbing the canister, she looked at the powder inside. Since when did sugar have blue specks in it?

Her face fell as her mind realized exactly what it meant. Her sister \_had\_ poisoned Bannon and probably Jonny. What was she going to tell their parents? Why would she have done all this? Tears ran down her cheeks. Why? Shaking her head, she put the thoughts away. She could ask Laurie about the defection later. Right now they had to find Jonny. Pausing, she wondered what to do about the canister of sugar. Laurie would definitely notice if she just took it, but also, without it she wouldn't be able to poison anyone else. Grimly, she took hold of the canister and left her sister's apartment.

Once she was outside and headed back to Intelligence Command headquarters, she pulled out her cell phone, quickly dialing Jessie's number.

"Caroline."

"It's Sandman."

"What did you find?"

"I found the poison."

Jessie drew in a deep breath. "Sandman, I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Ashley swallowed to hold back tears. "Me, too. Look, I'm on way to the labs at IC headquarters. I'll give it to Dr. Kensington if he's still there. Then I'll be back at the hospital and we can wait for Pudge and Stick."

"All right," Jessie agreed. "I'll see you then."

Ashley took a deep breath, trying to keep her emotions under control. She could break down after this nightmare was over.

\* \* \*

Race was surrounded by Quinque, Hadji, and Dr. Kensington when he opened his eyes. Jessie gave a small gasp of happiness and hugged his neck.

"Hey, \_ponchita\_," he greeted. After she pulled away from him, he looked at all the people in his room. "What happened?"

Quinque exchanged glances and then looked at Dr. Kensington.

"Looks like I've been nominated." Dr. Kensington gave a small grin. "To make a long story short, you were poisoned, Leader."

"Poisoned? By who?"

"Laurie Ray," Jessie replied, grabbing her father's right hand.

"What?" If he had had the strength to jump out of the bed, he would have. He looked around the room again, suddenly realizing that something was not quite right. "Where's Jonny?"

He felt the tension that suddenly ran through Jessie's body at the question.

"We're not sure," Xander answered. "Laurie captured him, but we don't know where she's taken him."

Dr. Hernandez knocked on the wall near the door. Everyone in the room turned to look at him.

"I hate to interrupt this, but Leader Bannon does need to get some rest. And there are a number of tests we'll need to run on him to make sure this poison is out of his system for good. You all are welcome to come back and talk with him more in the morning."

Jessie leaned down and kissed her father on the cheek. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me, too. Get some rest, all right, \_ponchita\_?"

She gave him a slight smile. "All right."

Before long, Quinque and Hadji were standing out in the hallway.

"What should we do now?" Dion wondered.

Jessie and Hadji looked at each other, seeing the weariness that rested in both their eyes.

"Go home," Hadji instructed. "Get some rest. We can't do anything for Jonny if we're falling over our own feet in exhaustion. We'll meet at my office tomorrow at nine o'clock."

\* \* \*

Jonny had no idea how much time had passed before Laurie stalked back onto the room. Snarling, she picked up the dagger she had threatened Jonny with earlier and lunged at some invisible attacker.\_ \_

\_She's crazy\_, Jonny thought as he watched her.

She must have felt his eyes on her because suddenly she turned toward him, her eyes glowing with an insane light.

"Your Quinque," she whispered as she drew near, the dagger still in her hand. "That's who it had to have been. They're the only ones who could have figured it out."

Jonny just watched her, not knowing what she was talking about.

"Your Quinque has ruined everything for me. I just heard a rumor that Bannon is still alive and my poison has been stolen." She placed the dagger at his throat. "I wish I could kill you right now."

His eyes challenged her to cut his throat. The dagger wavered in her grasp, just nicking his skin. He felt a few drops of blood slide down his neck.

"But I can't. I need you now more than ever." Pulling the dagger away from this throat, she removed his gag. "I want you to call Hadji Singh."

"No." His voice was raspy. He had not had anything to eat or drink in he didn't know how long.

Laurie plunged the dagger into his upper left arm. Jonny yelled at the sudden pain and black spots appeared before this eyes.

"Yes," Laurie replied.

"No," he gasped, trying to stay conscious.

Reaching over, Laurie slowly twisted the knife, tearing the wound. Again he couldn't help the scream that tore from his mouth, echoing in the abandoned building. His breath was short and he could feel himself going into shock.

"Yes," she repeated, her hand still on the hilt of the dagger. "What is it going to be? Calling Hadji or losing your arm in extravagant pain?"

Jonny panted, trying to catch his breath. His sight was blurring. "I'll call him."

"Good." She laid a cool hand on his cheek and removed the dagger from his arm. "I want you to tell him to go visit Anaya. What's his number?"

"What time is it?"

"Nine-fifteen in the morning."

He rattled off to Hadji's office and Laurie put the phone next to his ear after it started ringing.

"Sultan."



"It's Apollo." He was still breathing rapidly.

"Apollo, where are you? Are you all right?" Jonny could hear the concern in his brother's voice.

"I've been better," Jonny admitted. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

There was a short pause and Jonny had a sudden flash of insight. Quinque was meeting with their coordinator right now.

"Anything, you should know that by now. Just name it."

"I want you to go talk to Anaya. I'm pretty sure this whole thing was a trap from the beginning."

"You think Anaya mentioned Laurie just so we would go and break her out of prison?"

"Exactly." Jonny drew a deep breath as pain raced up and down his arm. "So will you do it?"

"Without a doubt, Apollo. But how can I reach you with any information I might get from her?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll call you again in an hour. Thanks, Sultan."

Laurie hung up the phone before either of them could say anything more.

"Good job, Quest." She stood and retrieved her coat. "Don't go anywhere while I'm out."

Once she was out of his sight, he allowed himself to pass out.

\* \* \*

"It's a trap. You know that, right?" Ashley wondered after Hadji had told them everything Jonny had said over the phone.

"Of course it is," Hadji calmly replied. "But it's a chance we'll have to take. It might be the only way we'll be able to find Jonny."

He eyed Jessie as she put the final touches on his jacket. She was sewing a tracker into the sleeve, as they all figured his watch would be rendered useless once he was captured.

"There." She tossed the jacket to her friend. "I don't think they'll look for a tracker there. But nonetheless, be careful."

Hadji nodded. "I will be." He caught the eye of each Quinque member. "You all know what to do."

They nodded, and Hadji walked out of his office.

\* \* \*

"Hello, Anaya," Hadji greeted.

The beautiful daughter of Zin turned to look at him. "Hello, Hadji. It's good to see you again."

"I wish I could say the same. I have a question for you."

Anaya raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"Laurie Ray."

She laughed, a silver sound that echoed throughout the dank prison cells. "You've figured it out, have you?"

"It wasn't hard once you had all the pieces put together," Hadji stated.

"And once your brother sends you down here." Laurie's voice came from the other end of the prison.

She stepped out of the shadows and Hadji's eyes flickered down to the gun in her right hand.

"I want you to open Anaya's cell," Laurie said, keeping the gun trained on Hadji.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will never see your brother again."

Hadji paused.

"You do want to find Jonny, don't you?" Laurie asked.

Cautiously, Hadji nodded. "Of course."

"Then open her door."

Hadji typed in a code on the keypad beside Anaya's door. Immediately the door smoothly opened and Anaya stepped out. She laid a hand on Hadji's cheek.

"It's good to be able to touch you again, Hadji."

"Again, I wish I could say the same." He turned around to face Laurie. "Where's Jonny?"

Laurie grimly smiled. "You'll get to see him soon enough. First, though, give me your watch."

Hadji hesitated and then slipped the watch off his wrist. With her gun, Laurie motioned for Hadji to drop it on the floor. He did as she ordered.

"Jonny?" he questioned.

Anaya stepped around Hadji and took the gun from Laurie's grasp. After letting the weapon go, Laurie reached into a sheath at her hip and pulled out a long dagger. From this distance, Hadji could not tell if the redness on the dagger was caused from rust or blood.

"One more thing before I take you to him," Laurie said, taking a few steps toward the coordinator. "Strip."

Hadji's mouth dropped. "What?"

"You knew it was a trap when Jonny sent you down here. You wouldn't have come unprepared. I'm guessing that you've got another tracker somewhere in your clothes. So strip."

"No."

Laurie threw the dagger at him, and Hadji ducked out of the way. But before he had time to recover, Laurie was there, punching him in the face. Unconscious, Hadji fell to the floor.

\* \* \*

Jonny turned bleary eyes toward Laurie and Anaya as they dragged Hadji into the room.

"Hadji," he whispered as they deposited his unmoving friend on the floor.

"Hello, Jonny Quest," Anaya said, nearing the altar where he was shackled. "I haven't seen you in a few weeks." She studied him. "But I must admit that you don't look so good right now."

"What did you do to her?" Jonny wondered, looking past Anaya at Laurie.

Anaya turned, following his gaze. "Can't you just come to believe that she hates Dulab? After all, Bannon is the one who let her rot in that prison."

Jonny shook his head, then gasped at the dizziness that overwhelmed him. He had lost a lot of blood from the knife wound in his arm. At least the poison was not yet affecting him. "No," he said. "I don't believe that. I might if she had some logical arguments, but she doesn't. Is it something you did in Questworld?"

Anaya gave him a hard smile. "Yes." She looked back at Laurie. "The moon and the stars."

Laurie glanced at Anaya, confusion on her face. "What did you say?"

"The moon and the stars," Anaya repeated.

Laurie's eyes rolled up and she collapsed on the floor next to Hadji's body.

"What did you just do to her?" Jonny demanded.

"I gave her back her real memories. Your father developed a way for Questworld to take a person's jealousies and hatreds and make them overwrite any other emotion. Therefore all our good Laurie could feel was jealousy for you and hatred for Bannon."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Laurie stirring, obviously

listening to everything Anaya was telling him.

"Why?" he wondered.

"It made her the perfect assassin," Anaya explained. "No one would expect that someone from a Task Force would try to kill either you or Bannon."

Laurie leaped at Anaya, trying to wrestle the gun away from the twin. Jonny could only watch helplessly as the two fought.

Laurie sat on top of Anaya, choking her and ignoring the pounding of Anaya's fists upon her body. Eventually, Anaya was able to plant her feet well and pushed upwards with all her strength, knocking Laurie off balance. Both clambered to their feet.

"I can't believe you made me do those things," Laurie snarled.

"But you wanted to do them. Questworld could only work with those things that were already in your mind."

"I'm only human," Laurie retorted. "Everyone has hidden desires. But that doesn't mean everyone would actually act on those desires."

Laurie kicked out at Anaya, who managed to duck. As she stood back up, Anaya swung a punch. Blocking the punch, Laurie threw a right hook, clipping Anaya on the jaw. Anaya stumbled backwards and then fell to the ground as Laurie followed up with a roundhouse kick. The gun clattered to the floor and Laurie bent down to pick it up.

"You sicken me," she told Anaya.

Standing, she started toward Jonny. Instantly, he saw the guilt in her eyes. He knew it was not really her fault. Somewhere, deep within her, had been the desire to see him finally fail during a mission. And thanks to his father, she had tried to make that desire a reality.

From behind Laurie, he saw Anaya sit up, holding something metal in her right hand. He opened his mouth to warn Laurie, but Anaya had already thrown the dagger she had taken from Laurie's sheath. As if time suddenly slowed, he saw the knife twirl through the air and embed itself in Laurie's lower back. Without a sound, Laurie fell.

"No," Jonny whispered. His throat tightened and he suddenly found himself fighting not to cry.

\* \* \*

"It's been too long," Xander said, worried. "He should have moved by now at least."

Quinque was gathered around Ashley's computer, watching the green 'H' that was Hadji's signal. He had been down there with Anaya for nearly fifteen minutes. Something should have happened by now.

"Xander's right," Dion entered. "This whole situation just doesn't feel right."

Jessie nodded. "Go down there. Don't try to rescue him or anything, just scout out the situation."

Quickly Xander and Dion were out the door.

"I hope everything is all right," Jessie muttered.

"Me, too," Ashley agreed.

A few minutes later Xander's voice came over Jessie's watch.

"Stick, what do you have for me?"

"Nothing good, Caroline. We found clothes, but no Hadji." Xander's voice reflected his depression. "It seems like they were expecting us to try something."

Jessie cursed. Next to her, Ashley blankly stared at the monitor screen, as if Hadji's signal would suddenly start moving.

"Sandman, is there someplace that Beanbag might have decided to hole up?" Xander asked through the watches.

Ashley snapped back into the real world. "Not that I know of, Stick."

"Did you two explore Columbus when you first got here?"

"Of course. Didn't everyone?" She tried to make her voice light.

"Is there any place she really liked?"

Ashley paused, her mind flashing back to those first few days in Columbus. They had looked through a lot of old buildings, shifting through ruins, pushing dirt and plaster off priceless works of art. She remembered seeing the golden crown encrusted with valuable gems that they had uncovered at the . . .

"The Sciences and Arts building," she whispered.

Jessie blinked. The building was only about five minutes away from headquarters.

"The Sciences and Arts building," Ashley repeated, louder. "That's exactly where she would go."

"Did you hear that, Stick?"

"Got it, Caroline. We'll meet you outside."

Jessie laid a hand on Ashley's shoulder. "Do you think you can handle this?"

Ashley's face showed sadness, but she nodded. "I have to."

\* \* \*

Jonny watched as Anaya pulled the knife out of Laurie's back, blood freely pouring from the wound. He could still hardly believe that Laurie might truly be dead.

"What are you going to do now?" Jonny asked.

"Arrange for you and Hadji to take a trip back into Zinja," Anaya replied.

Hadji sat up, holding his tender jaw. He quickly noticed that he was wearing the dull gray clothes of the prison, and his coat was nowhere in sight. With a sigh, he knew that Quinque would not know where he was. All of their planning had been for naught. Carefully he shifted positions, wondering if Anaya was paying attention to him or not. She did not make any moves in his direction, just pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. He saw Jonny laid out on some kind of altar. His eyes grew wide at the sight of the blood dripping down the side of the altar. And then he saw Laurie, a growing puddle of blood beside her.\_ \_

\_This is not good\_, Hadji thought.

Suddenly he caught a small movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head, he saw a flash of red hair and his heart, and hopes, rose. Jessie.

He felt a small puff of air rush by his head. Anaya stopped and then fell to the ground, a small dart sticking out of her arm.

"Well," Hadji remarked as Quinque ran into the room. "How come I feel like this rescue was completely anticlimactic?"

Ashley knelt down beside her sister, putting pressure on the knife wound. Xander went to Jonny's side, tugging on the chains that held their leader.

"It's good to see you again, Jonny," Xander said as he tied a scarf around Jonny's arm.

"You, too, Xand." Jonny gave him a weak grin. "And now that the calvary is here, I hope you don't mind that I'm going to pass out." Blackness swiftly claimed him.

\* \* \*

"So Anaya is back in jail and every member of Quinque, including Hadji, has been given some of Dr. Kensington's antidote, as a precautionary measure," Jessie said.

"And Laurie?" Jonny wondered, his blue eyes full of concern. He shifted in the uncomfortable hospital bed. His left arm was in a sling.

Jessie pursed her lips. "She'll make it, but she's going to be paralyzed from the waist down. And it's going to take her even longer to recover from the psychological wounds Zin gave her."

"I feel sorry for her," Jonny commented. "It wasn't her fault."

Jessie nodded. "I know that, but it's going to take quite a while to convince her of that. As I said, it's just going to take some time. I have hope that someday she'll be back to the Laurie Ashley knew and loved."

"How's Ashley taking all this?"

"Better than I might have expected. She's spent a lot of time in the labs, trying to bury herself in her work. Like Laurie, she'll need some time to heal."

Jonny shook his head. "There are some days that I just hate this job." He sighed. "But then I think of all the good we've done through the years and somehow, the good evens out the bad."

Jessie took his right hand. "I know what you mean. Sometimes I just feel like hiding my head under my bed until the whole world is back to normal. But then I realize that this is normal and that if I ever want to feel safe again, I have to keep fighting to try and restore life as we knew it before the fall."

"We can't give up."

"No," Jessie agreed. "Not until Zinja has fallen."

End  
file.